

BELL, JEFFREY, M.F.A., Everyday Specific. (2008)
Directed by Billy Lee. 6pp.

My thesis is an investigation of sculptures made from everyday things. This body of work was created by combining elements from a variety of functional objects and materials in order to create work that has a residue of and references to the commonplace. In this written thesis I discuss my working process, my references and influences. The work will be on display at the Anne and Benjamin Cone Building from May 4 until June 1, 2008.

EVERYDAY SPECIFIC

By

Jeffrey Bell

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2008

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis as been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife Reagan and my son Finnegan for their love and patience; my parents, Sandra and Robert Bell, my mother-in-law Diane Lewis and father-in-law Michael Lewis for their support and understanding. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee: Billy Lee, Mariam Stephan, Carl Goldstein and Andy Dunnill for their wisdom and guidance. Lastly, I would like to thank Richard Goldberg, Director of the Center for Applied Design, for all of his help and instruction in the Gatewood Studio Arts Building woodshop.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
EVERYDAY SPECIFIC.....	1
CATALOGUE	7

EVERYDAY SPECIFIC

The materials I work with come from everyday things, and my references are to other commonplace objects and to popular culture. The language of toys is one that I find fascinating. For me, the most interesting toys are those that are only very subtly different from the real-world gadgets that they are based on. A heightened color, a scale shift of certain elements, the consideration of size as it relates to the size of the child it is intended for are some of the ways toys animate the objects they are based on. Fairy tales and animated films often rely on similar modifications of the mundane to create something unusual, something less familiar but something that is still rooted in the real world. In my own work I often contemplate how these seemingly minor changes can help to activate forms and materials, and to redefine and recontextualize them.

Like toys, stories such as “Alice in Wonderland” and “The Wizard of Oz” are effective for me because the fantastic is made successful in its relation to the banal. In both stories an altered, preposterous world is created against a humdrum setting. In the end the main characters are reintroduced to their original world but their views have been modified. Though I do not view my work as overtly narrative I do hope to create a similar arc of thinking about the commonplace that can be found in these stories. In this way the familiar is viewed anew.

My primary goal for each work is to bring together elements from different backgrounds to create a new object that lives in the precarious area between the known

and unknown -- something that retains a sense of recognizability but is unfamiliar, to create an object that has poetic sensibilities. The works are clearly made of everyday materials but the new object isn't too literal with regard to the references I build into it. They allude to a variety of sources and concepts but never too literally. A tension is created in the work as a result of the decisions I make.

A key component of my studio practice is the search for materials to work with. I spend hours each week at scrap yards, consignment shops, and surplus sales amassing objects that can potentially be elements of a sculpture. The sorts of materials I'm attracted to are fairly diverse. It might be a delicate table or heavy equipment. Often it is a surprising aspect of the overall form or an unusual element that I'm drawn to. I always consider the object's surface, the infinite ways that finishes lay on different woods, the paint colors used for industrial equipment versus those applied to products made for the home and the wear that the exterior has accrued over time.

In my studio I live with the object to try to get to know it better. Very often I'm initially drawn to a certain characteristic but over time I begin to consider other aspects. I then break them down into their components to find out how they work, how they're put together and to view their elements when they stand on their own.

At this point I begin to put the components together. I manipulate the forms and combine elements from different objects to create something new. I am often most successful when the end result is something that surprises me. I continue to experiment with what I am creating and to push the sculpture beyond my initial conception -- cutting and shaping, sanding and gluing, drilling and welding until the parts converge. It

regularly becomes apparent that I have to greatly alter or discard that which I was at first so attracted to.

My decision-making process is different for every work. I let my conceptions about the original object I'm working with help dictate the direction. I may be very interested in the color or material but not as much in what the object was. In this case I will work to bring the focus to that color and to the material by combining or layering it against a variety of other materials and through this process work to create a form that might be very different from what it once was. Alternately it could be the form or functionality of the object that drives my investigation. In this case I work to construct an object that points to that aspect. Though I have set these approaches up as being diametric opposites this is not entirely the case. There is stratum of both ways of thinking in every sculpture.

Ultimately I get at something new, but also something that reflects its previous language: a sculpture that at first glance reaffirms assumptions of everyday objects, but at further examination resists those notions and lives outside of my understanding. The finished work strives to be both more poetic and allusive.

As I'm working, I reconsider the references I build into the sculpture and their contexts. Ideas and forms emerge through the creation of the new object. At all times I reevaluate my own understanding of the artists whose works I feel are related to my own. I also constantly pull in ideas and influences from things I see everyday and from popular culture.

Marcel Duchamp's work always interests me. I often find myself contemplating his *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923) and the work he created in preparation for it. The combination of the chocolate grinder imagery with ambiguous characters clearly based on conventional forms is compelling for me. In comparison to this approach I'm always fascinated by the transparency of found objects in Bill Woodrow's early work. One is always aware of what the original object is and how he has manipulated it in the creation of a new object.

In my own work I let the direction of the sculpture dictate how much I alter the materials. I transform the materials but I never want them to be so modified that they lose their character. When viewing my sculptures it sometimes becomes clear that a form came from a particular type of furniture or machine while often the origin of the element is less clear. In this regard, an artist whose approach I admire is David Smith, particularly his Voltri series. The certainty about just what materials he used varies in each work. He altered them according to his vision of what the finished work should be.

The work of Mona Hatoum has such clarity and wit but also an element of surprise and shock. Her work plays with the language of everyday forms but often in different ways. *Light Sentence* (1992), has a dynamic, almost celestial quality that is balanced by the realization that it is created by pouring light through metal shelving. In some of her other work you are first aware of the object she uses and only later are you aware of the alteration. *Untitled (Wheelchair)* (1998), appears to just be a normal wheelchair but then you catch on to the fact that the push handles are made of knives. Her ability to dictate the order in which we perceive these decisions is crucial to the

success of the work. In my own work I search for the same sort of tension that can be created by altering found objects and relying on the viewer's familiarity of forms and materials.

Many of my influences come from sources outside of the art world. When I was growing up, my father often had old British cars that he worked on. I spent a good deal of time with him in junk yards looking for a specific part for a Triumph or a MG. In his shop there were always shelves full of parts removed from his car or parts we had collected that were waiting to be installed. I always loved the aesthetics of machinery and their parts but I knew relatively little about the actual functionality of these cars. I was attracted to the materials and colors and forms. I later realized that some of the magic I saw in these parts was lost when I became aware of just what their function was. I try to always be aware of how I looked at things as a child. I still haven't lost my appreciation of those types of cars. When I have a free hour I often find myself wandering the lot of a British car repair company near my house. To see a broken down Triumph coupe next to a completely restored Rolls Royce always amuses me. The differences in finishes, form and quality of materials that I see on that lot are present in my work.

As a child I spent much of my time sawing, nailing, painting and drawing on anything I could find. Now I have a son of my own and through him I remember how I saw things as a child; he can focus all of his attention on a small rock that he finds on the ground and an instant later be marveled by the enormity of a vast landscape. Through my work, I continue to expand my understanding of the possibilities of the materials I

choose. I strive to concentrate on the smallest detail while understanding that it is the unknown that keeps me engaged.

CATALOGUE

1.	<i>For the Noise</i>	Steel, wood, paint	19 X 39 X 36 inches
2.	<i>Rocker</i>	Steel, wood, paint	16 X 18.5 X 11.25 inches
3.	<i>Rock/Slide</i>	Steel, wood, paint, felt	7.5 X 8 X 12 inches
4.	<i>Grind</i>	Steel, wood, paint	7 X 22 X 8 inches
5.	<i>Reason</i>	Steel, wood, paint	36 X 16.25 X 17 inches
6.	<i>Quidor</i>	Steel, wood, paint	11 X 15 X 3.25 inches
7.	<i>Pedestal Machine</i>	Wood, steel, paint	24 X 13.5 X 10.25 inches
8.	<i>Tip</i>	Steel, wood, paint	5 X 10 X 6 inches
9.	<i>Todi Capitano</i>	Steel, wood, paint	3 X 3 X 3 inches
10.	<i>Cutters</i>	Wood, steel, paint	11 X 21.5 X 11.25 inches
11.	<i>Valiant Effort</i>	Wood, steel, concrete	10.5 X 14.5 X 12 inches
12.	<i>Guild</i>	Steel, wood, paint, felt	9.5 X 9.5 X 6.75 inches